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The talks that Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization began recently under pressure from Egypt and Syria are unlikely to resolve quickly the problems between King Husayn's regime and the Palestinians but could lead to closer coordination of strategy for Middle East peace negotiations.

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Jordan-PLO: Beginning a Dialogue

A first round of talks between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Jordan in late February in Amman ended on an inconclusive note. The two parties—archenemies for years—touched only tentatively on the problems of coordinating their peace negotiating strategies and forging a link between Jordan and any future West Bank state.

The dialogue opens a useful channel for exchanging views and lays the groundwork for possible closer cooperation later on. Given their history of bitter relations, however, neither the PLO nor Jordan is likely to adopt a more flexible position on a coordinated approach to a renewed Geneva conference on the Middle East without continuing strong pressure from Egypt and Syria—the two states that promoted the dialogue.

The dialogue moved ahead, at least symbolically, this week when Jordan's King Husayn and PLO chief Yasir Arafat reconciled publicly in Cairo where they were attending the Afro-Arab summit conference. They apparently held a number of individual meetings with Egyptian President Sadat and Syrian President Asad at which the subject of an early formal tie between the PLO and Jordan was surely discussed.

Press reports state that Husayn and Arafat decided to forge a link prior to the resumption of Geneva peace talks, but it is unclear how much real agreement was

reached. Any arrangement between the two probably is general in nature, leaving the difficult details of closer cooperation still to be worked out. They apparently did at least agree to meet again with the Egyptian and Syrian presidents within the next month or so, this time in Damascus.

Meanwhile, the next step in the dialogue process is likely to take place at a meeting in Cairo next week of the Palestine National Council, the Palestinians' policy-setting parliamentary body. The Egyptians and Syrians, working with moderate Palestinians, have been busy for months preparing the way for a council session, and they presumably expect it to endorse in some form the Jordan-PLO tie they seek.

Jordan's Position

For the Jordanians, who drove the Palestinians from Jordan in 1970 and 1971, the talks with the PLO are a painful and potentially hazardous exercise. Before the talks began two weeks ago, King Husayn privately said that he did not know what to say to the PLO delegation and that the Jordanians would begin by simply listening to what the PLO had to say. While seeing few possible benefits for them from a relationship with the PLO, the Jordanians have definite ideas on what they are determined to avoid:

- They will not allow the PLO a free hand politically in Jordan.
- They will not permit the PLO to use Jordan as a base for political or military activities on the West Bank.

- They will avoid being drawn into negotiating with Israel over the future of the West Bank and Gaza without a clear public mandate from the PLO and the other Arabs that would protect Jordan in the event these territories were only partially returned.

Jordan does want to develop and maintain a strong voice on the West Bank whatever the ultimate disposition of the territory, and this will color Jordan's dealings with the PLO on this subject.

Jordan's determination in this regard was reflected during the talks in Amman when Jordanian officials resurrected the plan King Husayn unveiled in 1972 for a United Arab Kingdom. Under the plan, the East and the West Bank areas would each be ruled by a native-born governor and a provincial cabinet responsible for internal affairs. The national government, led by Husayn, would be responsible primarily for foreign and military affairs.

The Jordanians asked the PLO to review the proposal and respond at some future date, presumably during the next round of talks. When it was initially aired, the Jordanian plan was roundly denounced by virtually all other Arabs. It is unlikely that the PLO will now find the idea any more palatable unless the plan is considerably modified. But the PLO response will provide some clues on where the dialogue might lead.

The PLO

There is some division of opinion within the Palestinian movement over the

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wisdom of improving relations with Jordan, but most Palestinian leaders appear to favor the idea. Because both Egypt and Syria are promoting the dialogue, the PLO is unable to play one off against the other as it has in the past on other issues.

Although uncertain about where the dialogue will lead, the PLO probably does have some general objectives in mind. Palestinian leaders realize there is a strong possibility that Jordan will be involved in negotiations over the future

status of the West Bank and Gaza. They are further aware of the likelihood that any Palestinian state formed from those areas will be required to have ties to Jordan.

The PLO wants to ensure its participation in the creation of such a Palestinian entity. Should Jordan assume the Palestinian proxy in the negotiating process, or if a joint Jordanian-PLO delegation for Geneva is formed, the PLO wants to be sure it has the controlling voice in

negotiations over Palestinian issues.

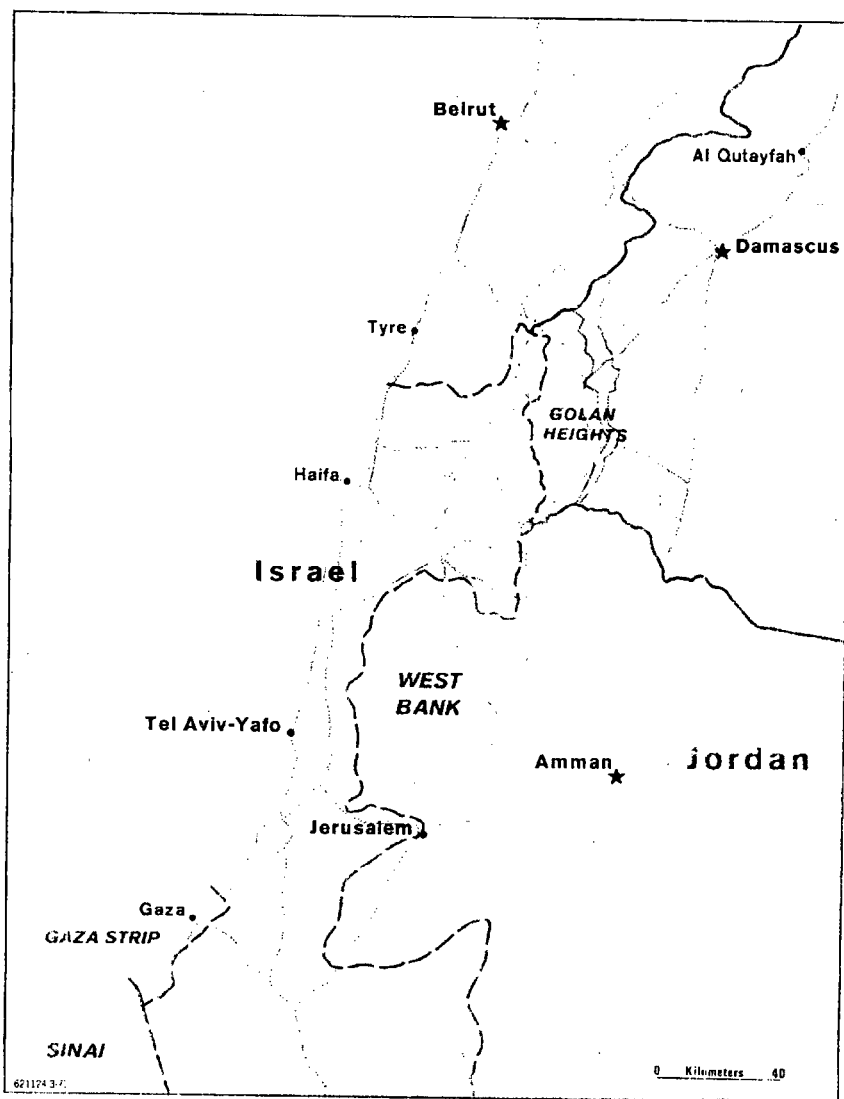
PLO leaders have viewed with some anxiety Jordan's recent efforts to increase its influence among Palestinians on the West Bank at their expense. The PLO may hope that improved relations with Jordan will undercut Jordanian activities on the West Bank, although such a step could have the opposite effect of legitimizing the Hashemite regime in the eyes of West Bank Palestinians. Through Jordan, the PLO also is looking for some direct contacts on the West Bank and more direct access to the approximately 900,000 Palestinians living in Jordan proper.

Beyond these goals, Arafat and other PLO leaders may hope that establishment of the dialogue with Jordan will buttress recent efforts to demonstrate to Israel and the US the PLO's new "moderation." The PLO will try to avoid giving the Jordanians its full proxy in any future dealings with Israel.

Both Egypt and Syria are clearly nudging Jordan and the PLO in the direction of some kind of formal association as a device for overcoming Israel's objections to dealing directly with the PLO. President Sadat has urged the two parties to form a confederation prior to a reconvened Geneva conference. President Asad has given his guarded endorsement to this idea, provided the PLO and Jordan agree.

The willingness of Egypt and Syria to force the pace of the dialogue, however, is likely to depend on the steps they believe the US intends to take next to break the current negotiating impasse.

The Egyptians seem anxious to see the matter resolved and the Geneva talks launched; the Syrians, however, appear to be hanging back, waiting for some sign that they will get back all or at least a major part of the Golan Heights in the next round of negotiations. Without some credible assurances that the US is ready to press Israel for substantial concessions, neither Egypt nor Syria may be prepared to push the PLO to compromise its position and strike a hard and fast deal with Jordan over the future of the West Bank.

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